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## FACING THE LANGUAGE BORDER: MULTI-LINGUALISM IN TWO NOVELS OF M. G. VASSANJI

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The study focuses on the use of various languages including Swahili by the author Moyez G. Vassanji against the English background of his works, by concentrating on two of his “African” novels, namely *The Gunny Sack* and *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*. In his novels, Vassanji uses multiple literary devices involving the use of different languages, such as code switching and code shifting among others. The paper analyses the use of these various ‘language-mixing’ devices in his novels from a literary point of view. A set of literary instruments allow the author to attain various tasks, such as creating ‘local colour’, restoring social relationships, and also expressing the characters’ search for new identity, as well as reflecting the author’s own background as a multi-cultural person and writer.

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### Introduction

Moyez Gulamhussein Vassanji, an internationally acclaimed writer, was born in 1950 in Kenya, in a family of East African Asians, and raised in Tanzania. He attended the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the University of Pennsylvania, where he specialized in nuclear physics, before moving to Canada as a postdoctoral fellow in 1978. From 1980 to 1989, he was a research associate at the University of Toronto. During this period, he developed a keen interest in Indian literature and history, co-founded and edited a literary magazine, and began writing fiction. His fame as a writer started in 1989, with the publication of his first novel, *The Gunny Sack*, which won a regional Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1990; the same year, he was invited to the International Writing Program of the University of Iowa.

M.G.Vassanji is the author of seven novels, two collections of short stories, a travel memoir about India, a memoir of East Africa, and a biography of Mordecai Richler. He is twice winner of the Giller Prize (1994, 2003) for best work of fiction in Canada; the Governor General's Prize (2009) for best work of nonfiction; the Harbourfront Festival Prize; the Commonwealth First Book Prize (Africa, 1990); and the Bressani Prize. *The Assassin's Song* was also shortlisted for the Giller Prize, the Governor General's Prize, the Writers Trust Award, and India's Crossword Prize. His work has been translated into Dutch, French, German, Hindi, Italian, Japanese, Latvian, Portuguese, Spanish, Turkish, and Swahili. Vassanji has given lectures worldwide and written many essays, including introductions to the works of Robertson Davies, Mordecai Richler (*Canadian 20<sup>th</sup> century writers* – MG), Anita Desai (*Indian novelist born in the 20<sup>th</sup> century* - MG), and the autobiography of Mahatma Gandhi<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.mgvassanji.com>

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To say that Vassanji's works feature colourful language and the masterful use of style has become almost a commonplace in the critical publications on his books. Critics even describe his prose as the one where "each episode, place and personality is drawn in fine and vivid detail" (Jean Patterson in *Orlando Sentinel*) or even as "an extraordinarily colourful and richly complicated carpet" (Toronto Star).<sup>2</sup> In fact, one would hardly doubt the stylistic abilities of one of the most gifted authors born on East African soil. However, it looks like the stylistic features of his works have so far received less critical attention compared to thematic concerns or setting of his novels and short stories. This paper is trying to trace how the author uses various languages in the stylistic, thematic and, not to the least extent, ideological palette of his texts. This last aspect inevitably compels to expand the borders of purely stylistic analysis and to appeal to historical, cultural and other similar issues as reflected in Vassanji's works.

In order to understand the way and the purpose of using languages other than English in, at least, selected works of Moyez Vassanji, it would be reasonable to answer at least two questions. One - how and for which purpose does the author use what I would call "language-mixing devices" (such as code-switching and code-mixing)? Two - what does he write about languages, including English, but mostly African and Indian ones, and which roles, according to the writer, do these languages play in the lives of his characters and societies he describes? I will try to answer these questions mainly by using the material of two of his novels, namely *The Gunny Sack* (1989) and *The in-between world of Vikram Lall* (2003), since I believe in these books the necessary linguistic data is contained not only in abundance, but is used in the way that allows to fulfil the above-set tasks. According to Paul Bandia,

African writers<sup>3</sup> [those who write in European languages – MG] use [the African language(s)] to express certain specific functions in social interaction situations, and also some community-specific ways of communicating. The most common form of code-switching and code-mixing used by African writers is changing between vernacular language(s) and the European language. When African writers cannot adequately express African socio-cultural reality in a European language, they resort to the use of indigenous words and expressions. (Bandia 1996: 140)

Along with that,

[t]he main motivation for the use of native words and expressions is their socio-cultural relevance [...]. Besides preserving meaning and compensating for a lack of adequate terminological equivalence, native words and expressions add local colour to the text,

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<sup>2</sup> Although these two quotes are taken from the cover notes for *The Book of Secrets*, Vassanji's novel published in 1997, in my opinion they are applicable to his prose in general.

<sup>3</sup> It may be debatable, whether Vassanji can be considered an African writer. However, here I will use the words of Tanzanian literary critic Mugyabuso Mulokozi, who stated in an interview: "If Vassanji speaks about Tanzanian problems, that is, he gets his impetus from Tanzanian life, which he experienced before he went abroad – he will still remain a Tanzanian author" (Mazungumzo 2001: 90) (my translation).

and putting them side-by-side with their gloss, explanation or translation, enriches the text from a stylistic point of view [...]. Through code-switching and code-mixing, African writers use native words and expressions [...], as a means of achieving relevance, [...] authenticity and local colour without necessarily modifying the grammatical structure of the European language (used) (Bandia 1996: 143).

It is also quite obvious that Vassanji really profoundly uses the local languages both to spice up his texts with ‘local colour’ and to introduce and describe the local cultural phenomena. As a small example of the latter, the Swahili word “kitumbua” looks much more appropriate in a novel text than a cumbersome explanatory entry such as “a local rice-flour sweet fried pie”. Moreover, Vassanji’s literary skills enable him to frequently use these words in self-explanatory way (although, for being on a safe side, providing also a glossary). At the beginning of the book for example, the word *mchawi* (a sorcerer, wizard) is not translated or explained directly, but its meaning is rather implied in the following text.

This bwana Khalfaan had moved into Matamu from the Kilosa area a few years before [...], and was a mchawi of renown. It was said that he had predicted the arrival of the Europeans [...], had a cure for every ailment, and to protect the village from attack he had the medicine that would make its huts appear as ant hills. (26)

However, even using these words for this rather ‘conventional’ purpose, Vassanji in fact goes far beyond it. Through masterful use of the non-English words and expressions, he manages to express the characters’ ethnicity, cultural background and social stand. In the long run, it allows him to create the specific atmosphere of “East Africanness”, to present the region as a contact zone of various cultures, mentalities and attitudes. This ability of brilliantly using the ‘language –mixing devices’ became apparent already in his debut novel, *The Gunny Sack*.

### **The Gunny Sack**

This first novel of Vassanji, that some scholars refer to as “a book that in the most penetrating manner captures the Asian people’s search for identity in the sub-region” (Ilieva & Odiemo-Munara 2011: 197), is also the one in which the author establishes many stylistic features of his further books. This was convincingly commented on by M. L. Pandit in his essay on Vassanji’s novel:

Even before the reader starts on his journey of discovery of this sea of a novel, he notices several interesting things about it, which provoke his thought. [...] The non-English words, mostly in Swahili and Cutchi-Gujarati, are intended to be integral to the text [...]. The choice of the word ‘sea’ to describe the novel is deliberate. For, even as it maintains the tradition of the European realistic novel in its selective combination of fact and fiction, *The Gunny Sack* also relates to the Indian epic traditions of the Mahabharata and the Kathasaritsagar, the latter literally meaning a sea of fiction formed by the mingling of several streams of narrative. Vassanji’s novel conforms to that description as it mingles the Indian-Gujarati strains with the Zanzibari-Kenyan-Tanzanian elements of African origin [...]. The linguistic features of the novel –

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European, African and Asian – are part of its exquisite flavour, and do full justice to the multicultural fare served by the author. (Pandit 1996:111)

I would add that these “European, African and Asian” linguistic features of the novel, manifested primarily, and sometimes solely, through ‘language-mixing’ devices, serve, as noted above, other purposes beyond the creation of the novel’s “exquisite flavour”. These purposes, in the end, provide the reader with a better grasp of the idea that seems to lie in the foundation of this captivating work – the search of East African Indians for a new identity.

In fact, Vassanji starts mingling the languages already in the very first lines, for the novel’s epigraph is given in two languages. It contains a three-line excerpt from a classic Swahili poem *Utenzi wa Inkishafi* by Sayyid Abdallah bin Nasir and six lines in English from a poem *Vacillation* by W.B. Yeats, both excerpts speaking of the futility of human effort. It seems that already in this very first textual (or, rather, ‘para-textual’) fragment of the novel the author uses this bi-lingual quote to define the general mood of the novel and orientate the reader towards the author’s message. This message, as I suggest, is to glorify in an almost epic manner a no less epic quest of his people for their new self - regardless of how successful or otherwise the results of this quest were.

I will not completely disagree with Justus Makokha who states that the identity of Asian Africans lies in their interstitial position (Makokha 2009: 68-69) – it definitely and obviously remains so in the long run. However, as put by Makokha himself, there was “order before disruption and the imagined, originary moment when fear and unhomeliness were imagined as non-existent” (71). In other words, in colonial times, or, as characterized by Vikram Lall, the main character of another of Vassanji’s novel dealt with in this paper: In the “colonial world of repressive, undignified subjecthood, as also of seductive order and security” (7), where everyone was shown a place in hierarchy, Indian immigrants and their descendants seem to start occupying their own niche in East African society. Through the life of the main character of the novel’s first part, an India-born Muslim of a fictitious Shamsi community named Dhanji Govinji (name can roughly be translated as “Wealth to (of) god”), and his relatives and children, the author speaks of established and strengthening position of the Indians in the region. He stresses their good relationship with their neighbours – the coastal Swahili people, a “respectable and prudent Swahili company” (21), (even Govinji’s body, after his untimely death caused by his own grave mistake, was found by a Swahili woman cake-seller, 42). In Matamu village, in its heyday inhabited by several Moslem (Swahili and Shamsi) and Hindu families, “Diwali and Idd were celebrated jointly and with great pomp, with processions, dances, and feasts; surely a sign, as any, of prosperity and stability” (41).

Even with the Germans, the ever-strong colonisers, the Indian community managed to establish acceptable terms. For example, when the German soldiers searched all the houses in Matamu

looking for three maji rebels<sup>4</sup>, Indian houses were spared from search (19-20). At the same time, in order to keep the relationship with the local community, it was Govinji, who hid the rebels from search and later helped them escape unscathed. Vassanji does not specify the language in which, say, Germans and Indians, or Indians and Africans communicate in colonial Tanganyika (except specific cases, such as one of Govinji's relatives named Abdul, who learned German in local German school and became "a lifetime friend of Germany" – 51). However, it appears that even "by default" it should be Swahili, for exactly Swahili, according to the historical sources, was the language of communication in German East Africa (see, e.g. Malik 1996).

After British advent, although facing certain difficulties, the descendants of Dhanji Govinji successfully go on in major East African cities. They settle in Mombasa, then Nairobi. For Salim, Govinji's grandchild, who overtakes the narration for the second part of the novel, Nairobi for a long time remains a 'vision of paradise'. Finally they stay in Dar es Salaam, as Salim says, "frightening until you know it, mysterious until you grew with it", again managing to acquire a niche in the local society. In those days, Swahili again seems to enter quite firmly into the everyday life and mentality of the community. Salim and his siblings, growing up against the Swahili background of the immediate neighbourhood (87), acquire the habits of language mixing very quickly, and soon Salim's elder cousin Shamim tells him stories with "'Once upon a time' in English and then mixed with Cutchi and Swahili" (97).

Independence and subsequent times brought many changes to the lives of Salim, his family and the entire community. The old colonial world with its "colonial fiat and segregationalist policy" (Makokha 2009:69) has fallen apart, so Salim and his numerous relatives are again trying to re-acquire a distinct identity, a sense of belonging to the new East African milieu, where the 'white-Asian-African' hierarchy has lost its meaning. As again put by Makokha:

Vassanji draws our attention not only to circumstances under which Asian Africans developed their interstitiality but also to the fact they have lost their sense of a secure identity, theirs is now an identity of the in-between space [...] Salim and his like now have to adopt and adapt to an atmosphere of an unknown, unfamiliar environment that is East Africa after independence. (69)

And one of the ways – and moreover, important ways – of this adaptation is the acquisition of the language, namely, Swahili, through which Salim and "his like" seem to procure for a new Tanganyikan and, later, Tanzanian identity. For Salim it is even more important – his grandmother, Govinji's first wife, was an African slave woman named Taratibu (Cautious), and this drop of her African blood (a 'whiff', as he puts it) in his veins is still one of the major concerns of Salim.

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<sup>4</sup> Maji-Maji – violent resistance to colonial German rule by several indigenous communities in German East Africa, lasting from 1905 to 1907 and suppressed by colonial authorities.

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Even on the eve of independence, preparing for the elections to the first Tanganyika's self-government, the most prescient Indian candidates involved Swahili in their campaigns. For example, Fateh the Coalseller, nicknamed Sungura (the Hare) after the cunning character of Swahili animal fables, not only waged his campaign entirely in the language (148), but even "threw his challenges in Swahili, while he was answered in English" by his local rivals, Dr. Kara and Mrs. Patel. "Whatever Swahili Dr. Kara had spoken in Mombasa, now eluded him"; however, Mrs. Patel, who build her platform on the notions of "African country; races living in harmony [...]; we are all Tanganyikans now [...]" was acquiring the language and could read her speeches in it" (147).

The author describes in detail the episode in which TANU activists use a well-known Swahili funny story (in which an African servant slaps his white master, because of the latter's ill-spoken Swahili, misled by the consonance between the words "coffee" and "kofi" – Swahili for "slap") in the electoral campaign (152-53). "The crowd is hilarious" – and Salim and other Indians are also in this crowd. Nuru Poni, a.k.a. A. A. Raghavjee, the one with the best command in Swahili among the local Indians, invites an African *shehe* to teach Quran to his children and later goes as far as supporting interracial marriages (185).

The importance of the language in the new independent Tanganyika – and especially its importance for the local Indians – is stressed in many episodes. In the march to support the President Salim and the "men and boys of Kichwele and Viongozi marched behind Nuru Poni. We wore kitenge and khanga shirts, we took with us the President's picture, we carried banners proclaiming our loyalty and we sang and danced. And when we reached State House, Nuru Poni made a speech in Swahili that did us proud" (184). Swahili serves the Indian community's different needs, from begging with the African neighbour for returning of the fallen cricket ball (117-118) to resolving the conflict with the same neighbour if the boys misbehaved ("all the three Ponis were fluent in Swahili": 119). In the end, it looks like Swahili, as a symbol of their new nation and identity, becomes really part of the personality of young Tanzanian Indians, relatives and friends of Salim. In a moving episode about a farewell party of Nuru Poni's son, who goes for overseas studies, Hassam, a local singing talent, "former Elvis and now Beatle fan", tries to entertain the guests with a Beatle medley. In refusing to sing Elvis or Jim Reeves, he agrees to end with *Kwa heri*" (225) a popular Swahili song of those days, title meaning "Goodbye" – in literal translation, "For the luck".

The importance given to the language by the government is also obvious. Amina, Salim's African girlfriend, whom he met at the National Service camp, was asked to give to the cadets lectures in politics and culture. The girl was in no doubt about the language of her lectures – "She decided she would read to her class. First she gave them Abdel Latif Kofi (a Swahili poet from Lamu, one of the characters – MG), then Shaban Robert. She translated excerpts from Chinua Achebe" (221). And it is exactly through Amina, through their love relations and spiritual bond,

that Salim's serious, self-conscious attempts to acknowledge his current and acquired new identity got their start. Identity, ethnicity, race were already the topics of their very first conversation – and already then the language issues became involved. In fact, it started with Salim's surprise at the sight of a book in Amina's hands:

Salim: "Abdel Latif Kofi – *Songs of Captivity*. You are reading poetry".

Amina: "Yes, Indian. Poetry of my kinsman, in my own language. But what do you do to pass your time, Indian? [...]"

Salim: „Why do you call me ‘Indian’? I too am African. I was born here. My father was born here – even my grandfather!"

Amina: "And then? Beyond that? What did they come to do, these ancestors of yours? Can you tell me? Perhaps you don't know. Perhaps you conveniently forgot – they financed the slave trade!"

Salim: "Not all of them..."

Amina: "Enough of them!"

Salim: "[...] and what of your Swahili ancestors, Amina? If mine financed the slave trade, yours ran it. It was your people who took guns and whips and burnt villages in the interior, who brought back boys and girls in chains to Bagamoyo. Not all, you too will say [...]. (211)"

It seems that Salim tries to establish a sense of equality or at least resemblance, between him and Amina, reminding himself that Amina's ancestors were also initially strangers here. In fact, Amina herself admits that resemblance, when afterwards she silently continues her conversation with Salim in her thoughts:

It was not only you who were brought up with a sense of modesty, Indian. My mother never showed her face outside, she went about in a *buibui*. Your mother, you say, runs a store wearing a dress [...] Perhaps they have met. Do you know what it was like to be an African in colonial times, Indian? It was to be told that no matter what you achieved, you were ultimately a servant [...]. After all this, what of self respect? How many years before we regain it? I look at an Indian or a European, and I wonder, "What really does he think of me?" (211)

Actually, Amina poses to herself similar questions as Salim does – but Amina beats him seriously by the fact that her language, language of her kinsmen, is rooted on this soil. In view of this, it seems that not by chance the author made his Amina, of all Tanzanian ethnicities, a Mswahili – a coastal, the bearer of the purest and the richest variety of the language. And exactly through the involvement of the Swahili language the first major step on the way of two communities towards each other is made – for the first person who managed to break the wall of alienation between them was Salim's old grandmother, Ji Bai:

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Amina and Ji Bai. They simply fell in love. [...] Old, bony Ji Bai could match Amina word for word. Among her friends were more Africans than Asians [...] ‘Nyerere<sup>5</sup> is my son’, she once told us. ‘We Mswahili, nini?’ Amina asked her, another time, to which she said, “Yes, I am Swahili... and Indian and Arab... and European”, at which point she walked stiffly up and down, as she thought the Europeans did, and sat down giggling. (228)

Later in the same episode Ji Bai and Amina together do the ‘maji maji’ dance, commemorating the freedom fighters of the old days, and “a few young men joined in from outside, and the whole shop was going maji maji [...]” (227-8).

This small episode bears, in my view, a nevertheless considerable symbolic meaning. It seems that it is not just by chance that Amina tries to manifest her affection to Ji Bai by suggesting the commonality of language. Of course she knows that the old Indian woman is not a ‘Mswahili’. But by calling her one, she acknowledges their common belonging to this land, fertilized by the bones and blood of their ancestors. The land which they are now supposed to share on equal grounds (and in Ji Bai’s vision it extends over everyone who lives on it – Africans, Indians, Arabs and Europeans), and also acknowledges Ji Bai’s competence of Swahili language. It is in this spirit – which is also an overtly anti-colonial spirit as founding element of the Nation – that Africans and Indians get together in the ‘maji maji’ dance. How serious Amina’s determination was from now on to treat Indians as her compatriots and equals, and how important, in her opinion, was the role of language, is shown in another episode. Matured and sophisticated Amina, back in Tanzania after her overseas studies, at the gathering of her ‘comrades-in-thought’ again raises the questions of belonging and identity of East African Indians:

In Dar, at Amina's house, we said Tanzania is different, its Asians more truly African. Indians have been on the coast for centuries, and they speak English - Amina attested, having come from abroad – quite differently from Indian Indians. There is a distinct Swahili-ness to their English. And ask them, she exhorted, the Indian term for *bakuli*, or *machungwa*, or *ndizi*, and you'll catch them at a loss. As for their brand of Swahili: first, there are several brands, from the bad (*kuja-ne!* or *kuja-to!*)<sup>6</sup> to the good – which if you want to hear, go and talk to Mama Ji-Ji (Ji Bai – MG) opposite the market; and second, have you heard the Swahili the Africans speak in Nairobi (*eti, kula maji!* or: *mutu mubaya!*)? And who would deny that a *chapati*, or a *samosa* or a curry were not Coastal food? Even *biriyani*. And have you seen the furniture of a traditional Swahili home? There you'll see Indian influence.

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<sup>5</sup> Julius Kambarage Nyerere (1922-1999) was known for his efforts to fight against racial discrimination in colonial and post-colonial times, and his attempts to create a sense of nationhood among Tanzanians beyond religious and racial divisions as part of his domestic policies.

<sup>6</sup> Here, the wrongly used imperative “come!” (*kuja* instead of *njoo*) is mixed with exclamations found in some Indian languages, such as Gujarati.



And have you heard a Zanzibari *taarabu*? Hum it for an Indian and he'll give you the words in Hindi. There. Thank you, Amina, I said. (245)

“Thank you, Amina” is apparently the best way Salim can present his gratitude – for in Amina’s case he met a genuine – even if maybe a sole – attempt, made by a person from “the other side”, to verbalise – and maybe even to formulate – his own hopes and aspirations, to acknowledge his equality. Amina goes, in fact, as far as acknowledging the Indian contribution to the development of Swahili language and culture. Were Salim’s and his people’s aspirations, so aptly vocalised by Amina (and also Ji Bai), met by reality? I will try to deal with this question in the concluding part; before that, it appears necessary to take a look at the role of the languages in the book, which, in many aspects, appears to be related to Vassanji’s debut work – his fifth novel, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003).

### **The In-Between World of Vikram Lall**

The situation largely similar to that portrayed in *The Gunny Sack* is described in *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall*. Here the Indian family – this time the Punjabi Hindus, named the Lalls – is also trying to find their place in the social landscape of colonial and post-colonial Kenya. And again, languages, especially Swahili, play a prominent role in this quest. As in his first novel, the author presents the three main languages of his characters already in the epigraph to the book, which consists of a line from an English poem (*The Waste Land* by T.S.Eliot), a short quote from an Indian holy book (*Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*) and a Swahili riddle about a shadow.

Again, as in *The Gunny Sack*, the author actively uses language-mixing devices for the purposes of ‘local colour’ and ‘expression of socio-cultural reality’. He quotes the names of Indian dishes and cloth e.g., “bhajias, samosas, dhokras, bhel-puri” (8), “chappals” and “shalwar-kameez” (21, same on 25, 36), terms related to Hindu religion e.g., “swastika” and “tilak” – 79, demon’s names – “daitya”, “bhutlok” and “Ravana” (107), “brahmachari” and “sanyas” (163), “kismet and karma” (239, etc.), local healers and sorcerers (“mundumugos and maalims”: 278), African traditional clothes like *buibui*, *kanzu*, *kofia* and *khanga* (111). Here, switching to Swahili also takes a special place: for example, in order to express the deep “Swahili-ridden” background of the Tanzanian capital, Vassanji uses Swahili words and expressions instead of (however possible) English ones – “we had maandazi and chai” (instead of, say, “local pancakes and tea”: 188) and “we stood up, waving ahsante to the seller” (instead of “waving thanks”: 190). It is also worth noticing that portraying the diversity as the most prominent feature of his land of birth, Vassanji again turns to the ‘linguistic landscape’ – in chapter four he speaks of the mornings with “radio turned to Hindustani service, servants chatting outside in Kikuyu, Luo, Nandi, or Swahili” (43).

At the same time, as in the case of the first novel, here Vassanji’s use of language-mixing devices and his authorial remarks about different languages go far beyond the representation of local

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colour and cultural reality. The author demonstrates that languages are in fact powerful factors in the social life of the characters, performing various functions – first of all, especially in case of the main characters of the novel, assisting them in expressing and, moreover, constructing their varied identities.

In colonial Kenya, of course, the leading role is assigned to English. For Indians, English is the constant reminder of their inferiority, of the unattainable equality with the ‘sahibs’, which is brilliantly expressed by Vassanji through the words of Vikram, the elder child of the Lall family, the main character and the narrator of the novel. Recalling their meeting with the Bruces, a family of British settlers whose children would later become playmates of Vikram and his sister, he observes:

They (Bruces) had rather refined accents, their language sharp and crystalline and musical, beside which ours seemed a crude approximation, for we had learned it at school and knew it to be the language of power and distinction but could never speak it their way. (10)

This is a rather precise ‘linguistic reflection’ of the status of Indians in colonial Kenya – it is only a “crude approximation” to the status of the English, and they never could have it other way. Indian languages – mostly Punjabi, with occasional words and expressions from other Indian tongues – are shown by the author as occupying a particular place in colonial hierarchy, in the best way embodying the ambiguous ‘in-between’ state of their speakers.

On the one hand, through them the white establishment acknowledges the privileged position of the Indians compared to the indigenous people. When the colonial police is raiding the African quarter next to the Indian settlement in Nakuru in search of Mau-Mau suspects, the British officers are greeting Indians in the mixture of various Indian languages: “How are you, kem-che, namaskar, salaam – you can never be too careful with the terrorists, this is for the safety of you and yours” (33). Therefore, Indian languages have a higher status than the African tongues, as Indians have a higher status compared to the Africans. On the other hand, they are also used to express the contempt of the white settlers to “coolies” - at the Nakuru railway station a drunk settler shouts at Vikram’s granddad in Hindi (61). And for and by the Indian people themselves, as it seems, their native languages are used for the spontaneous and strong expression of their only true identity – the identity of colonial subjects, whose “Indianness” is being trampled down by colonialism, through the alienation from their ancestral land and through their ambiguous state in colonial Kenya. It seems that in order to stress this, the author switches to Indian languages, mostly without translation, in the most dramatic moments in the life of the characters. That becomes obvious during the police raid, when Vikram’s uncle Mahesh swears in Punjabi (33); during various dramatic moments of a love affair between Vikram’s sister Deepa and her African boyfriend Njoroge; at the decisive and mortally dangerous instants in business (Vikram talking to his partner

Narandas about the illegal deal into which they are pushed by government officials (258); and numerous similar occasions. Expressions in Indian languages are also quoted at the moments of strong joy, but these are too few in the novel compared to those of intimidation and sorrow. Even Deepa, Vikram's sister, calls him "bhaiya" – "brother" in the moments of deep apprehension or sorrow. Thus, Indian languages, in my view, are used by the author as the most expressive marker of their 'in-between' state. They mark their status in colonial society, higher than the Africans, but lower than the British. In addition, they allow them to express their cultural identity suppressed by colonial order.

In addition, Indian languages also mark the internal compartmentalization of the Indian community by ethnic belonging. In Dar es Salaam, where Vikram was studying at the university, "there were very few Punjabis, though, most Asians speaking Cutchi and Gujarati, which I could not help but learn, to my future benefit" (182). The benefit, indeed, soon became obvious – his future wife, "shoved" to him by relatives, was a Gujarati, and only Vikram's knowledge of the language initially made the marriage tolerable for the girl, who otherwise felt ill at ease in the "hostile" Punjabi environment.

The local African languages are apparently at the bottom of the 'linguistic hierarchy' of colonial Kenya. For example, for the colonial officers the local languages (unlike, probably, Hindi) are the 'savage tongues' which they use to support their orders given to the locals, making them, as they hope, more understandable. A vivid example is again given in the police raid episode in chapter 3, where the author mixes several languages:

Out with your *karatasi*, your tax receipts! Show your work permits, or you have explaining to do before you go back to Kikuyuland. *Hiti! Fisi!* Hyenas! Chop-chop! (32)

Here, as we see, in the order issued by the police officers to the inhabitants of the African quarter – to line up with their documents in front of their houses – at least three languages are used. The most important words are doubled in Swahili (*karatasi* – tax receipts confirming the legal status of an African in colonial town and *chop-chop* – Anglicized corruption of Swahili expression "chap-chap", meaning "quickly"). Whereas the intimidating and derogatory "hyenas" is repeated both in Swahili ("fisi") and Kikuyu ("hiti"), so that the subjects of the raid are left without a doubt about their unenviable fate in case of misbehaviour. Earlier, at the beginning of the raid, the order to leave the houses ("Out, you hyenas!") is again doubled in Swahili ("Tokeni nje! Sasa hivi!").

Among the local tongues, Swahili is given a special position. The colonial government uses Swahili for the "divide and rule" purposes – or in this case rather "unite and rule", for it is the language understandable to all communities. The government issues the anti-Mau-Mau leaflets in Swahili (42); it is used for issuing orders (as seen above) and for expressing the respect to the

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superiors. The servants Amini and Mwangi address the Indian and European masters saying “tafadhali Baba”, “Bwana” and even – “doubly respectfully” – “Bwana Sir” (95) and speak about them as “brown-skinned *bana-kubas* – *wazees*” (100). Also remarkable here is a form of language/grammar hybridization, because the term *wazee* is redundantly pluralized with -s, a feature of English.

Surprisingly enough, it seems that the Indian and even the European community starts to perceive Swahili as part of their everyday life, and, I dare assume, part of their – yes, already Kenyan – identity. And exactly for this reason, the language builds bridges between races and communities – they use it in the situations, which involve humaneness, ‘unforeseen’ by the colonial codex of communication. Njoroge, the son of Lall’s Kikuyu servant Mwangi, talks to Vikram’s mother in Swahili (“Yes, *nampenda*, he had told her, I love my mother, and my own mother smiled, very satisfied”: 46). Mrs. Lall and her friend Sakina use the language while trying to help Mwangi, who was beaten by the police (“hitherto they had been speaking in Swahili, of which mother’s version was quite rudimentary”: 96). Vikram’s uncle Mahesh and his friends are talking in Swahili to an African blinded by British soldiers (“Saeed and the other Indian reluctantly let go of the man, who shot off like an arrow [...] and he was gently brought back with the words, *Ngoja, utaenda wapi?* Where will you go?”: 74). Even the Bruces, children of a settler family decorate their letter, sent from England to their playmates, Vikram and his sister, with Swahili words – apparently to stress their ‘Kenyaness’, their belonging to that soil (“Say “jambo” to old Njo. *Kwa heri!* See you soon!”: 103). During the family trip to Mombasa, Vikram himself acknowledges the fact that the language brings communities and races together: “The language was hard to understand (for it is the coastal Swahili, richer and more refined – MG), though it was spoken in abundance among Indians, Arabs, and Africans” (112).

Nalini Iyer, in her article on *Vikram Lall*, gives the following characterization of the younger generation of the Lall family:

While the children speak and understand Punjabi, celebrate Hindu holidays like Rakhi and Diwali, and eat *gulab jamuns* and *pakodas*, they also speak Swahili, become more engaged in local cultural and political life, and eat *ugali* and spinach with as much relish as they do chappatis. (Iyer 2011:208)

I would specifically stress the observation about Swahili, for in post-colonial Kenya, Swahili attained even greater importance in the lives of Vikram Lall, his family and his community. As with the characters of *The Gunny Sack*, it becomes one of the instruments with which they try to acquire their new identity as true Kenyans, true Africans, and true citizens of the country. Swahili words in their speech not only indicate the belonging of Vikram and his people to the new nation – it has become fashionable, it shows the commitment to the new times. Even Vikram’s father claims that he is “glad it is over and now is *uhuru*” (143), and in the speech of Vikram’s sister “the

odd bit of Swahili [...] was charming, and Njoroge and I both laughed” (145). The language becomes so engraved into the minds of Kenyan Indians, that even to describe bribery as order of the day in post-colonial Kenya, Vikram finds nothing better as to quote a Swahili proverb that “missionaries and explorers had [...] learned from the Swahili: *Ukiwa na udhia, penyeza rupia*: when in trouble, offer a dollar” (309).

However, the most serious case of Swahili used as a marker of “in-ness”, of a person’s true belonging not only to a new nation, but to its ‘sanctum sanctorum’, are Vikram’s meetings with president Kenyatta. It is symptomatic, that during the first meeting, when Kenyatta in the ‘fatherly’ manner gratifies Vikram for the “important service to the nation” (276) he hardly uses any other language but English. However, during their subsequent meetings, when Vikram comes to the state house looking for help and at the same time assures the President of his loyalty, they use more and more Swahili in their conversations. In addition, it hardly matters for Vikram that both his ‘services for the nation’ and the assistance he is getting from the President are far from being legal – violation of the law is becoming almost a norm. Much more important for him is the fact that Kenyatta talks to him and to others in his presence in Swahili. This seems to be taken by Vikram as a sort of sign that he is ‘in’, he is one of them, a member of the ‘in-group’, and he is happy that he is able to reply in the language. In fact, his Swahili is good, for Vikram learned it in Tanzania where he was a university student (287). Even the demise of the President is commented by Vikram in his thoughts in two languages - “goodbye my father; *kwa heri mzee*” (330).

One more episode, however small, seems to me as adding an important nuance to the author’s use of Swahili in this novel. When Paul Nderi, a government minister and Vikram’s immediate boss, commits Vic to his “important service to the nation”, which is a hundred percent illegal and in fact serves the enrichment of the new state elite, he does it openly in the form of the order:

I would like you to find your Indian contacts and have them change this money and stash it; like in a bank. [...] And when our different constituencies need money for their operations, they will be paid by those Indians. *Umefahamu?* You understand? (257)

Seemingly, Paul Nderi uses here a Swahili expression for the same purpose as the President did – to stress Vikram’s ‘membership’ in their limited circle. However, in my opinion the way Nderi does it resembles more the way the English officers were using it with the ‘natives’ in colonial days. But here the situation is somehow ‘reverse’: If the Britons were using Swahili to stress the inferiority and Otherness of the ‘native’ (learning English is impossible for you, so I have to use your ‘savage tongue’), Nderi uses it to stress his own superiority and the Otherness of the ‘Asian’ (this is my tongue, and you have to accept it, since neither ‘Kizungu’ nor your ‘Kihindi’ do belong here). “Yours is a secondary position” – that, in my view, was the message that the new elite was sending to Vikram and his kin.

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Thus Swahili, which was supposed to serve as a sort of “life jacket” for Kenyan Indians, to launch them into the new nation, seems to play in the first decades of post-colonial Kenya the same function as it used to perform in colonial days. The language that the bosses use to address their subordinates, thus marking the crash of Vikram and his community’s hopes to attain equality as a native inhabitant and a citizen.

### Conclusions

Summing up the aforesaid considerations, the presence of languages other than English, mostly through the use of what I conditionally call “language-mixing devices”, serves in the two discussed novels purposes reaching far beyond the conventional use of such devices for the needs of reproducing the local colour or specific cultural realities.

Languages in these novels perform multiple functions, - such as describing various aspects of social relationships in East African society in various periods of history, creating a panorama of East Africa as a contact zone of various cultures and reflecting diversity. One of the main functions is expressing and constructing the characters’ identity in various times and contexts. Amongst these languages, the most prominent role is delegated to Swahili, which plays cognate, but slightly different roles in the lives of the novels’ main characters. For Vikram Lall it is a means of adaptation and survival, of donning an identity proposed by the new elite of his country. For Salim – it is a way to reconcile with his African ancestry, his African blood inherited from his slave grandmother, with the long and turbulent history of his community and his land.

In both post-colonial Kenya and Tanzania Swahili was supposed to become a symbol of a new nation, of a new consciousness and identity shared by all the people of these countries, regardless of their ethnic and other backgrounds. As put by Ilieva and Odiemo-Munara, “Inter-ethnic and transnational migrations in East Africa have called for the rethinking of narrow conceptualization of languages and their importance. A failure in knowledge of the “dominant” language(s) of the new geographical/social space one occupies, temporarily or permanently, could easily be viewed as either an inability or lack of willingness to integrate or a tendency towards racial/ethnic isolationism” (Ilieva and Odiemo-Munara 2011: 198).

The question, whether the Indians in East Africa managed to acquire their new identity, is apparently left open by the author – his works are rather describing the process of searching for it, a search that in his novels was to a very high extent manifested through the language medium. However, we dare assume that they, largely, failed. Both Salim and Vikram, as well as their closest relatives and age-mates (Salim’s brother Sona and Vikram’s sister Deepa) find their shelter in the lands far from East Africa – in the USA and Canada; moreover, even there they do not assume their ‘haven of peace’. Peter Kalinney in his evaluation of *The Gunny Sack* suggests that it “offers a

narrative of perpetual motion”; and that it is “a narrative of packing and unpacking, of making do in the situations that offer few easy choices”. According to him, the metaphor of “the gunny sack”, is “a signpost for the family’s resourcefulness, and [...] their participation in transnational symbols of migration” (2008: 8). Agreeing generally, I dare offer an additional interpretation of the metaphor of the sack as a shabby receptacle of the past, its secrets, its curses, calls and evocations, and, along with that – as the very symbol of incessant “packing and unpacking”. This seems to be confirmed, implicitly, in the final monologue of Salim, which he actually recites exactly parting with the gunny:

Thus the disposition of the past. To be remembered and acknowledged, if only partly understood, without the baggage of paraphernalia [...]. We had our dreams, Little One, we dreamt the world, which was large and beautiful and exciting, and it came to us this world, even though it was more than we bargained for, it came in large soaking waves and wrecked us, but we are thankful, for to have dreamt was enough. (268-69)

And it seems that sharing the language was one of the ways to realise this dream, the dream of a new land, a new self and a new identity. Carol Myers-Scotton, although in relation to a somewhat different situation, made an observation that, in my view, is quite applicable to the matters discussed in this paper. She says that the negotiation principle “sees code choices as identity negotiations. ‘Identity’ is used in a very general sense; I do not mean to imply that code choices can fashion new persons out of speakers. What they can do is negotiate a particular identity for the speaker in relation to other participants in the exchange” (Myers-Scotton 1995: 151-52). It seems that exactly such choices were concerning the characters in the discussed novels. The choice of language that would allow them if not to acquire, but at least to negotiate an identity different from their initial one. In addition, as I tried to show, certain developments even in colonial days seemed to promise to such a negotiation to end successfully. However, the paradoxes and vicissitudes of post-colonial development led the local Indians to the state of, quoting Justus Makokha, ‘interstitial people’ – which state seems to be, however slowly, starting to vanish only now, in the beginning of the twenty-first century.

And, finally, the multilingualism of Vassanji’s novels allows to reflect not only the multiplicity of Vassanji’s own background as a multi-cultural person and writer, – as defined by Pandit, “the Toronto-based East African writer of Indian extraction” – but also of the background of his proposed audience, his ‘implied readers’. As I dare assume, his novels, in spite of the author’s international acclaim, are primarily (if not privilegedly) targeting the East African audience. Broadening the statement of Mugyabuso Mulokozi, quoted in this study, I assume that it was exactly the ‘East Africanness’ of the author and his primary audience that he wanted to stress, and that motivated him to use in a masterful and elaborate manner the language-mixing devices in his novels.

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